

Review of *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture*

By Michèle Mendelssohn

Mark W. Turner

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Henry James and Oscar Wilde have always been awkward bedfellows. For James, Wilde was a ‘fatuous fool, a tenth-rate cad’, though for Wilde, at least in one published review, ‘no living English novelist can be named with James and [W.D.] Howells’. (27) Although they met on a few occasions, they kept their distance and, critically, we have tended to keep these two late nineteenth-century Aesthetic giants apart, to think *either* about James *or* Wilde, rather than both. Michèle Mendelssohn’s recent study takes a fresh and detailed look at the pair and argues that their mutual influence is far greater than we have tended to allow. ‘Although their association was often ambivalent,’ she argues, ‘Wilde and James shared much:

social circles and friends; Irish-Protestant backgrounds; comparable sexual proclivities; a deep attraction to Aestheticism, Catholicism and the theatre; concern for commodity, visual and material culture; and a lifelong fascination with psychology. (12)

Furthermore, their complex relationship points to a new way of understanding transatlanticism in the period, since it ‘allegorises nineteenth-century American and British Aestheticism’ and suggests a ‘parable about two cultures in conflict that stridently externalised their concerns about one another and themselves while quietly internalising each others’ values in print, exercising their ideas so that they could strengthen their respective cultures.’ (4) This is bold work, based on impressively rich research across a range of material – *Intentions*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *De Profundis*; *Daisy Miller*, *Washington Square*, *Guy Domville*, *The Spoils of Poynton* and *The Turn of the Screw*, alongside often understudied works including James’s early stories and Wilde’s journalism. If, in the end, I am not always convinced by some of the conclusions drawn, I am always struck by the intelligent, probing questions asked and the ambitious reach of the project.

As Mendelssohn sees it, there is critical consensus around two ‘misconceptions’ that she seeks to challenge: first, that Wilde wasn’t particularly interested in James; and, second, that James’s apparent disregard for Wilde was based on sexual panic. While it involves some careful piecing together of evidence, the case for Wilde’s engagement with James is a good one, as demonstrated in a sharp close reading of Wilde’s January 1888 ‘Literary Notes’, published in the magazine he was editing, *Woman’s World*, in which he reviews Lady August Noel’s new novel, *Hithersea Mere*. Here, Mendelssohn convincingly unpacks a few seemingly in-passing comments to show Wilde’s knotty understanding of American realism. When Wilde writes that an ‘industrious Bostonian would have made half a dozen novels’ out of the same material as Noel, and would have ‘vivisected’ rather than ‘vivified’, we should recognize here Wilde’s engagement with James, partly mediated through Howells’ journalism, but also embedded in broader contemporary discourses about realism and the science of vivisection. This sort of focused and attentive reading makes for many rewarding moments in the course of the book.

Less rewarding for me is Mendelssohn’s attempt to correct the second misconception, in which she seeks to counter readings of James, in particular, that have tended to focus on queer sexuality. Here, she is arguing against critics who believe that James loathed Wilde because he really loathed his queer self (see Richard Ellmann and Hugh Stevens), or critics who believe that the closeted James suffered from ‘homosexual panic’, the continual pressure from an underlying fear of blackmail that the secretive queer man fears in western societies (see Eve Sedgwick). For Mendelssohn, ‘panic and loathing were not the keynotes of the James-Wilde relationship,’ so much as ‘puerility, esteem, contempt, admiration, frustration, jealousy, mockery, sympathy, flirtation, fascination, *Schadenfreude*, concern and care.’ (10) With such a long list of keynotes, you think there might be room for panic and loathing, too, but the queer critics are said to be ‘absurd’ and ‘reductive’, which seems a little harsh. (9-10) I don’t agree that what Sedgwick and others are doing is ‘labelling’ in any simple or static way, and I don’t believe that Sedgwick’s theory of sexual panic provides ‘a sort of cure-all for social, sexual and emotional complexity’. (10) I’m not sure that Mendelssohn needs to discredit Sedgwick and others in order to present her case. Having said that, Mendelssohn is surely right to push us to think about other ways of conceiving of James, Wilde and James-Wilde, even if we never really

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arrive at anything like a certain understanding of the shifting, complex relationship between the two (which, of course, is the point).

Although Mendelssohn focuses on two major figures and their points of real and intellectual or imaginative contact, she keeps an eye on the bigger picture. As part of Edinburgh University Press's relatively recent 'Studies in Transatlantic Literatures' series, the book has much to offer to this vibrant field of study. While we all know about the extent to which Britain and America were enmeshed culturally and economically by the late nineteenth century – and who better to represent the intricacies of those connections, with their various comings and goings and overlapping social networks, than James and Wilde – it is still surprising how little we really understand about the various forms of cultural engagement and exchange, at both a micro or macro level. In the first chapter, our understanding of Aestheticism on both sides of the Atlantic is complicated by a rich discussion of the way visual satires, lampoons and parodies of Wilde and aestheticism in the press, many by George Du Maurier, become part of the visual language of Du Maurier's illustrations for *Washington Square*. The critical movement across Anglo-American culture here is managed skilfully, proving nicely that Aestheticism is a useful and often revealing discourse through which to explore the concept of 'transatlantic culture'. It is the richness of this detailed work that I admire most in Mendelssohn's study. Although by the end, I am more convinced that 'the story of Aestheticism is fundamentally a dialectical one' (271) than I am that the James-Wilde relationship is exemplary of that dialectic, this is always a rewarding and original book to read.

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